Sonia Livingstone

Audiences and publics: reflections on the growing importance of mediated participation

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For Jay Blumler's Festchrift,
by Sonia Livingstone, LSE

Audiences and publics: reflections on the growing importance of mediated participation

Abstract

Who are the people addressed by the media – audiences, readers, consumers, citizens, the public? Academic discourse has often favoured pejorative terms, construing them as mindless, privatized and inconsequential; media, governmental and policy discourses have tended to follow suit. This chapter celebrates the work of Jay Blumler, long-time advocate of a more laudatory conception of audiences as publics: thoughtful, civic-minded, reflexive about the collective consequences of media engagement. This matters because it invites a nuanced empirical investigation of how people construct identities, find shared concerns and express voice through their responses to media, and because elite discourses about 'the everyday' tend to reinforce top-down social control. Instead, Jay Blumler has sought to recognise the descriptive and normative potential of a lively, diverse and deliberative mediated public sphere.

As part of the task of understanding how our world has become increasingly media-saturated lies a conceptual uncertainty regarding ordinary people. Through much of the twentieth century, they were called 'audiences' – in academia and in everyday discourse. In relation to specific media, they were – and still are – referred to as 'readers', 'listeners' or 'viewers'. In the jargon of contemporary regimes of governance, they are called 'consumers' or 'citizens'. As the media environment diversifies to encompass interactive and networked media, the language of 'users' has gained prominence. But although the notion of audience remains the most commonly accepted collective term for people's relations (now pluralised) to the media in all their forms, this does not bring consensus. Most importantly, audiences are still commonly distinguished from the main collective term for ordinary people in a modern democratic society, that of 'the public'.

In 'Audiences and Publics', my colleagues and I explored the intellectual and empirical complexities of the relations between these two terms in order to illuminate the role of the media in advanced democracies (Livingstone 2005a). 'The audience', especially in the English language, refers in everyday discourse to a casual, private and largely inconsequential engagement with media as part of leisure time, usually in the home, even to the extent of ridiculing the audience as mindless 'couch potatoes'. Meanwhile ordinary uses of the term 'public' in relation to the media generally focus on how the media offer a public service, meet a public interest or result in a public good. Academic discourse has built on this opposition, theorising the mass audience from a critical political economy perspective as constructed to serve the interests of the corporate mass media within an individualised, even alienated, certainly consumerist mass society. This can be seen in the classic views of, first,

Adorno & Horkheimer (1977), then Smythe (1981) and, more recently, Ang (1990). In parallel, scholars from the liberal pluralist traditions have argued for the necessity of an independent media as the fourth estate able to inform and enlighten citizens (Blumler 1992; Schudson 1995; Swanson and Nimmo 1990). These scholars have documented that citizens positively want such enlightenment, seeking out news media to support their civic engagement in ways that may be enabling or resistant of the state (Barnhurst 2000; Gamson 1992; Graber 1988).

Jay Blumler has long been a firm advocate of the audience as public. His research reveals an audience keen to seek out quality media and to become informed and engage in deliberative discussion with others. He has examined the conditions which most effectively support audiences as publics, in relation to the press, television and internet, and developed theoretical frameworks by which to understand these (Blumler 1970; Blumler and Katz 1974). Yet somehow he and many others in this tradition, and I include myself here, often seem to be swimming against the tide of a discourse that resolutely positions audiences as passive rather than active, withdrawn rather than engaged, consumerist rather than civic, selfishly motivated rather than public-spirited. As I shall argue in this short chapter, far from 'the audience' being obsolete in the age of digital 'users', it is this pejorative discourse that should be left behind, both for its underestimation of audiences' motivations and public concerns, and for its conceptual separation of the private and domestic from the public sphere of action and political significance (relevant here is Elliott's [1974] famous but misguided critique of uses and gratifications theory for its supposed reductionism and individualism; see Blumler 1979).

Persistent misconceptions of audiences arise partly for linguistic reasons. In 'Audiences and Publics', European scholars explored the relation between 'audience' and 'public' in different languages and traditions, observing that it is only in English (albeit the dominant language of international media and communication research) that 'audience' is an everyday term for the readers, viewers and listeners of mass media. Elsewhere, it is often the Latin word *publicus* that is used – as in the French *public/publique* or the Danish and German *Publikum* (Meinhof 2005). In such cases, a stark opposition between passive, commodified audiences and active, reflexive publics does not arise. In French, for instance, 'audience' is a purely technical term used by media ratings agencies to refer to measures for reach and share; it is not the term by which ordinary people refer to themselves when watching the news or going to a cinema. Nor, incidentally, was this word so used in Britain until the twentieth century: when charting the history of audiences in the eighteenth century, McQuail (1997) refers to the 'reading public'. Similarly, the term 'public' has been variously interpreted across cultures and contexts, and need not be given the highly rational and ideal reading common in (especially English-language) media and communication theory – as in Habermasian conceptions of the bourgeois public sphere (Outhwaite 1996) or as the self-knowing and deliberate agency of the public articulated by Dayan (2001).

However, this is not to say that audiences (or media publics) are not denigrated for their mindlessness across the non-English speaking academy, for the problem is also one produced by the elite status of the academy itself. Academics the world over have reproduced their elite status in society by their common disdain for popular culture, including the mass media and those who enjoy it or rely upon its views (here Bourdieu 1999 and Hoggart 1957 represent classic cases). In 'The Meanings of Audiences', Richard Butsch and I invited researchers around the world to reflect on the discourses (academic, state, media industry, popular) within which people's relations to media are framed. Inspired by Jay Blumler's claim that

comparative research 'can pose challenges to scholars' preconceptions and is liable to be theoretically upsetting' (Blumler, McLeod, and Rosengren 1992, 8), one purpose was to de-centre the Eurocentrism of much media theory (Kraidy 2011). It became apparent from this project that the concept of 'public' itself is an uncomfortable fit beyond the West, reflecting the people's very different relation to the state in non-democratic cultures. For example, where a Marxist or communist tradition has been dominant, the masses may be regarded positively (as the spirit of the nation or the vanguard of revolution) even as they are subject to direction and control. Further, pre-modern conceptions of 'community' remain strong in many countries, and this too gives today's conception of 'the people' a positive cast. But at the same time, every society that we examined discursively divides its 'elite' from the 'masses', often with a small group in the middle serving the elite. Mass media, by and large, are associated with the lowest stratum of society, with audiences castigated for their supposed limitations – including by academic theory; thus elitist interests in maintaining control generally outweigh democratic efforts to educate.

As will be apparent, I think academic concepts do political as well as intellectual work. By defining audiences normatively rather than through independent empirical investigation, such discourses can become a means of social control, especially of subordinate groups. In the West, framing audiences as publics attaches Enlightenment values to audience activity and sets a positive standard of an ideal audience. But when audiences are characterized as crowds, masses or even the mob, positive expectations of audiences are undermined and anxieties about audience inadequacy or misbehaviour come to the fore. It is no accident that throughout history, concerns over media audiences have centred on regulating the tastes and behaviours of women, children and the working classes (Butsch 2000). However culturally and historically contingent, it seems that discourses about audiences are used to justify and sustain status hierarchies and regulate access to power and privilege even as they obscure their effects by normalising their assumptions as the common sense operation of both formal institutions and the practices of everyday life.

There is one further reason why audiences are denigrated even in media and communication theory, surely the body of knowledge best positioned to understand them. This is the curious reluctance on the part of the academy to investigate empirically the nature of people's motivations, beliefs and actions in relation to the media, both as individuals and collectively (Livingstone 2010). If the highest ideals are asserted of publics while little is known of audiences, it is easy to presume a too-strong opposition between audiences and publics as is common in English-language scholarship. If, further, it suits the aspirations of an elite academy to maintain a comfortable relation to state power, or to prefer investigation of powerful organisations over messy living rooms, or sophisticated film texts over ordinary chat about reality television, then again audiences will be obscured by the lens through which they are (inadequately) viewed.

This was precisely the motivation for an 'exciting phase' in audience studies (Hall 1980) that opened up in the 1980s-1990s, drawing on German reception-aesthetics and American reader-response theory to reveal the interpretative work (Katz 1996) that audiences do in completing (or renegotiating or contesting or disrupting) the circuit of culture. This extraordinary moment of intellectual convergence, in which diverse streams of thought (temporarily but productively) coalesced to generate a new and fundamentally empirical project, illustrated Blumler et al.'s call for research to 'reach out' across the bifurcations of political economy and cultural studies, or administrative and critical, or text-centred and audience-centred, or qualitative and quantitative approaches that have long divided our field.

Since I was, at that time, completing my doctorate on audience reception of the soap opera (Livingstone 1990), and since Jay Blumler was my external examiner, it seems apposite to recall this moment as a spur to my present argument.

The importance of empirical investigation is clearly illustrated by audience reception studies' success in revealing people's diverse and contextualised responses to a range of genres (soap operas, news, reality television, comedies, documentaries and more). The findings challenged prior assumptions of textual meanings (from which audience responses could supposedly be inferred), strong claims regarding media effects (thus joining with the findings of minimal effects from persuasion and social cognitive studies of influence) and implicit notions of a homogenous or mass audience. Thus we now know that audiences are plural in their decoding, that the cultural context of viewing matters and that one cannot read off their response from textual analysis (or the claims of the producers). As the television audience once again risks being stereotyped as passive by comparison with the new forms of activity prominent among interactive and online media users, this body of knowledge remains pertinent.

But audience reception studies had a bigger ambition that merely making visible an audience too often devalued, marginalised or presumed about in academic and popular discourses about media. This concerned the relation between audiences and publics as part of the wider inquiry into the possibilities for and normative demands of democratic participation, especially in complex networked societies. One might read the whole history of political communication research as seeking to understand how addressing people in their role as audiences can advance (or undermine) democratic purposes, it being precisely the intersection of audience and public that must be mobilised as publics become too large for face-to-face interaction (i.e. ever since democracies expanded beyond the city state) and as states become too little trusted for representative elites to be left unaccountable to the electorate. Indeed, the more that society makes contradictory demands for, on the one hand, transnational engagement and global responsibility and, on the other hand, individual citizen rights to participate and be heard, the more the media are required to mediate and, therefore, the more the public is also an audience.

It is interesting but unsurprising, therefore, that audience researchers increasingly focus not merely on active audiences but on participatory audiences (Livingstone 2012), seeking to understand when and how media can enable audiences *qua* mediated publics to participate, with participation apparently overtaking earlier concerns with interpretation, identity or resistance (Carpentier 2009) and mediated citizenship now of greater interest than mediated consumption (Schrøder 2013). This academic interest includes far more than the traditional concerns of political communication, for the scope of the political has been extended to cover (almost) every dimension of everyday life and, in consequence, (almost) every media genre and platform. So too, of course, has the scope of the media - as Silverstone (2002, 762) put it, mediation is 'the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalised media of communication are involved in the general circulation of symbols of social life.' Thus, interest in participation is not simply on audiences' participation *in* media as on their participation in society *through* media – in other words, participation in media is increasingly the means to a grander end. Mediatization theory is helpful here, for it is less interested in the effects of media on an audience, in a situation or for an institution than it is in the fact that people and institutions now act in situations that include media or that have been shaped by media among other historical influences (Krotz 2007; Schulz 2004). Arguably, even the

distinction between participating in media and participating in society through media is disappearing as ever more institutions and practices in society become 'mediatized'.

In our *Public Connection* project, Nick Couldry, Tim Markham and I explored such claims in relation to ordinary people's life experiences (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2010). Extended diaries kept by a diverse set of individuals revealed that audiences do indeed engage with media as a means of connecting with the wider public realm. It is not that media engagement leads people to go out and take direct political action, for this requires political efficacy reciprocated by responsive institutions but, as Peter Dahlgren puts it, it can enable that 'reservoir of the pre-or non-political that becomes actualised at particular moments when politics arises … [for] the political and politics are not simply given, but are constructed via word and deed' (Dahlgren 2003, 155). But sometimes, people use those same media to disconnect and – for mediatization is far from overtaking all spheres of society as yet – they still have other means to public connection also that are not, as yet, significantly mediated.

Moreover, to whatever extent people are motivated or engaged in processes of participation, this can only become significant if the opportunity structures for participation are institutionally respected – voices must be not only expressed but also heard. Herein lies a problem for any collectivity brought into being or mobilised through media engagement – as Herbert Blumer (1946/1961) observed many decades ago, crowds, publics and masses tend to lack an organic relation to the established structures of society (unlike, say, workers, congregations, students or electorates). Efforts towards mediated participation, in consequence, often fail, breeding disillusion and distrust rather than political efficacy and accountability.

Today we are witnessing a transformation in the nature and significance of audiences in a digital, globalised age that is matched by a burgeoning of new research. Audiences are now dispersed, networked, engaged with hybridizing genres and stepping over the hallowed production/consumption boundary to speak back, remix, navigate and share in familiar and new ways. In response, audience studies of many kinds are proliferating, enriching our understanding of people's relations with media and, through media, with society. But I have argued that audience research cannot be parochial: it must connect with wider studies of societal structures and processes, and this is precisely how Jay Blumler the audience scholar, as well as the political communication scholar and comparativist has always worked, and how he urges others to work also.

I will end by drawing on Habermas' conception of the relation between the everyday lifeworld of audiences and the wider structures to which media provide ever more chances for connection (Habermas 1981/7; see also Fraser 1990). As shown in the table, distinguishing system from lifeworld independently of the distinction between public and private allows a two-by-two table that illuminates the problematic and shifting terrain of audiences and publics with which I have been grappling in this short chapter. Habermas' wider purpose is to identify the key features that delineate four spheres of society. Comprising what he calls the system world, he distinguishes the state from the economy (which he sees as increasingly interpenetrating and so undermining the vital but 'relatively informal ways of life' of the lifeworld; Outhwaite 1996, 369). Then he divides the lifeworld into the public sphere, which he specifically theorises as a vital democratic/deliberative buffer between the private and the state, and the personal or intimate sphere, which he sees as generating the energy and interest for the public sphere. As he put it: 'by "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is

guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body' (Habermas 1984, 49).

Table: Approaches to audiences and publics

	Public Audience as citizen	**Private** Audience as consumer
System Audience as object	**The state**: specifies legal and regulatory frameworks for the media industry, including protection for 'fourth estate.' *Audience as object of media education and, through their vulnerabilities, of content guidelines and controls*	**The economy**: encompasses the media industry, characterised by the commercial logics of media, advertising, marketing and branding. *Audience as commodity or market, characterised through ratings, market share and unmet needs*
Lifeworld Audience as agent	**The public sphere**: demands that media serve as a forum for democratic debate, mediated community participation and public culture. *Audiences as active and engaged, informed, participatory and/or resistant*	**The personal or intimate sphere**: embraces media for providing the images, pleasures, habits and goods for identity, relationships and lifestyle. *Audiences as selective, interpretative, pleasure-seeking, creative in doing identity work*

Source: Livingstone (2005b).

Why do I end with this? Because it is precisely the ways in which audiences relate to larger social structures and processes that makes them significant, and because such a scheme helps us to think through the contrasts among different discourses of audience – popular and academic – and, thus, varieties of audience research. Critical scholars from a political economy perspective examine how audiences become enrolled in the systems of state and economy. They are particularly concerned about the capture of the state by economic processes – prioritising market innovation over public value, for example. Still, the curious fusion of citizen and consumer approaches in contemporary governance regimes (Clarke, Newman, and Smith 2007) may, on occasion also benefit audiences, as Peter Lunt and I have recently argued (Lunt and Livingstone 2012). Those who work with audiences in their everyday lives are exploring the conditions under which the intimate sphere may support the public sphere and, in turn, how the public sphere may enable people to participate in larger processes of state and economy, provided these latter are responsive to the voices of ordinary people. Jay Blumler's own work on audiences, interestingly, encompasses the diversity of these approaches. Consider, for example, how his work on uses and gratifications has been particularly concerned with the wider societal implications of personal motivations to engage with media. Or, note how his work on the civic commons online shows how participation

from the lifeworld could inform and shape the actions of the system world (Coleman and Blumler 2009).

I do not, therefore, divide approaches to audiences into these four ideal types in order to separate them. Nor am I simply motivated to prevent our talking at cross purposes about audiences differently conceived. Rather, I find that these distinctions help us grasp the complex contexts of late modernity within which audiences are positioned by the increasing interpenetration of the lifeworld by the system world (as Habermas put it at his most pessimistic) and yet, at the same time, in which audiences are sustained by the resources of the lifeworld to contribute, at least sometimes and with some purpose, to what can be – and could be further – a lively, diverse and deliberative mediated public sphere.

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